

HISS, CHAMBERS, AND THE AGE OF INNOCENCE

Who Was Guilty—And of What?

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You will either aid in moulding history, or history will mould you, and in the case of the latter, you can rest assured that you will be indescribably crushed and maimed in the process. . . . History is not a blind goddess, and does not pardon the blindness of others.

—Whittaker Chambers in 1931

ALGER HISS is in jail. The last legal judgments have been passed. The decision of the courts stands: guilty as charged—guilty in fact of treason, though technically accused only of perjury. It is time, many of us feel, to forget the whole business: the prison doors have closed; let us consider the question also closed. But history is not so easily satisfied. Like some monumental bore, it grabs us by the lapels, keeps screaming into our faces the same story over and over again. The case of Judith Coplon, the case of William Remington, the case of Julius and Ethel Rosenberg, the inevitable case of tomorrow's Mr. X—the names change but the meanings are the same, and we protest that we have long since got the point. But have we? Of what was Alger Hiss guilty anyhow?

The statute of limitations protected Hiss against the charge of having passed secret material from State Department files to his accuser Whittaker Chambers, of having placed in the hands of agents of the Soviet Union documents which, whatever their intrinsic value, enabled our present enemies to

Was there really "a generation on trial" in the case of Alger Hiss? And if there was, what was its crime? LESLIE A. FIEDLER here examines the Hiss case in the light of the political—and moral—history of our time. Mr. Fiedler, associate professor of humanities at the University of Montana, has published fiction, poetry, and literary criticism in *Partisan Review*, the *New Leader*, and various other periodicals. His most recent contribution to *COMMENTARY* was an article on the French religious writer Simone Weil, in our January issue of this year.

break some of our most important codes. The transaction had taken place in 1936 and 1937—a war away, in years we ourselves find it difficult to remember, in years some of us don't want to remember. It is a painful thing to be asked to live again through events ten years gone, to admit one's identity with the person who bore one's name in a by now incredible past. It is hardest of all to confess that one is responsible for the acts of that past, especially when such acts are now placed in a new and unforeseen context that changes their meaning entirely. "Not guilty!" one wants to cry, "that is not what I meant at all!"

And yet the qualifying act of moral adulthood is precisely this admission of responsibility for the past and its consequences, however undesired or unforeseen. Such a recognition Hiss was called upon to make. Had he been willing to say, "Yes, I did these things—things it is now possible to call 'treason'—not for money or prestige, but out of a higher allegiance than patriotism—"; had he only confessed in the name of any of the loftier platitudes for which men are prepared publicly to admit the breaking of lesser laws, he need not even have gone to prison. Why did he lie?

HAD Hiss told the truth, the whole meaning of the case might have been different, might have attained that dignity of tragedy for which Alistair Cooke* looks

*Alistair Cooke, *A Generation on Trial*. In addition to Mr. Cooke's book, a thorough and scrupulous work, though one with many of whose interpretations I disagree, I have used for this article de Toledano and Lasky's *Seeds of Treason*, which is marred by a journalistic and melodramatic style, but contains much valuable background material and sets the Hiss case in an illuminating context of Communist espionage on two continents. I have also consulted the newspaper accounts of the case, particularly those of the *New York Times*, and the printed hearings of the House Un-American Activities Committee; while for further background, I have turned to the *New Masses* for 1931,

through its dossiers in vain. The defenders of Hiss, and of the generation they take him to represent, would have been delivered from the intolerable plight that prompted them, during the trials, to declare at one and the same time that (a) Hiss was innocent of the charges, the victim of a malevolent psychopath and (b) even if he was technically guilty, he had the moral right, in those years of betrayal leading to Munich, to give his primary loyalty to the Soviet Union. Why did he lie, and lying, lose the whole point of the case in a maze of irrelevant data: the signature on the transfer of ownership of a car, the date a typewriter was repaired . . . ?

The lie, it is necessary to see, was no mere accident, but was of the essence of the case, a clue to the deepest significance of what was done and to the moral atmosphere that made the deed possible. We can see Hiss's lie now in a larger context, beside William Remington's even more vain denials of Elizabeth Bentley's charges, and the fantastic affirmations of innocence by Julius and Ethel Rosenberg. These were not, after all, common criminals, who plead innocent mechanically on the advice of counsel; these were believers in a new society, for whose sake they had already deceived their closest friends and endangered the security of their country. In the past (and even yet in the present—the Puerto Rican nationalists, for instance) such political idealists welcomed their trials as forums, opportunities to declare to the world the high principles behind their actions, the loyalty to the march of history and the eventual triumph of socialism that had brought them to the bar. They might have been, in some eyes at least, spectacular martyrs; they chose to behave instead, before the eyes of all, like blustering petty thieves.

Not that the avowals of innocence, especially in the case of Hiss, were not affecting.

and various other official Communist publications. I do not know personally either of the principals in the case, nor have I made any attempt to communicate with them. I have no private or special sources of information. What I have attempted in this piece is an analysis based on publicly available documents, considered in the light of my own experience and knowledge of that world of values and beliefs out of which the incidents of the case arose. It is the lack of such experience and knowledge which makes even Mr. Cooke's careful and subtle book miss what seems to me the essential point.

Despite the absurdity of his maunderings about "forgery by typewriter," there was something moving—for a generation brought up on stories of Dreyfus and Tom Mooney, and growing to social awareness through the Sacco-Vanzetti trial and the campaigns to free the Scottsboro boys—in Hiss's final courtroom pose as *The Victim*. Even now, it is hard to realize how little claim he has to the title. For here was no confessed revolutionary, marked by his avowed principles, his foreign accent, his skin color, as fair game for the frame-up; here was a supereminently respectable civil servant from the better schools, accused by the obvious outsider, the self-declared rebel and renegade, Whittaker Chambers. Hiss seemed to desire both the pathos of the persecuted and the aura of unblemished respectability. His is, as we shall see, the Popular Front mind at bay, incapable of honesty even when there is no hope in anything else.

AFTER the hung jury, the second trial, the reams of evidence that frittered away the drama in boredom, one thing is quite clear. Twenty of twenty-four jurors, presumably twenty of twenty-four of us, believed that Alger Hiss was guilty of the perjury with which he was charged, of the treason with which he could not be charged.

For many, that verdict may be sufficient; for some, it is not enough. These cannot help feeling that the total issue of the guilt or innocence of Alger Hiss remains still to be solved. The verdict of the courts applies only to the "facts" as defined by precedent and law, a few fragments torn from their rich human contexts and presented to a group of men deliberately chosen for their relative ignorance of those contexts, and for the likelihood of their not being sympathetically involved with the passions and motives which underlay them.

Is there any sense in which Hiss is *symbolically* innocent—in which he may, indeed, have made the mistake of having passed certain papers via Chambers to the Russian agent, Colonel Bykov, but out of such naive devotion to the Good that it is a travesty of justice to find him on merely technical grounds "guilty"? It sometimes seems possible that when a Remington or a Rosenberg or a Hiss speaks publicly of his "innocence,"

he is merely using a convenient shorthand for an account of motives and actions too complex to set before an ordinary jurymen without completely re-educating him. One of the distinctive features of the recent series of "spy" trials has been that the accused and the chief accusers have been intellectuals, whereas the jury, the lawyers on both sides, even the judges, were not. And since in this country the intellectuals have been notoriously set apart from the general public, living, especially since the Russian Revolution, by different values and speaking a different language, communication is difficult. How can people who do not read the same books, and whose only relationship is one of distrust, arrive at a common definition of innocence and guilt?

One might argue on these grounds that what a jury could have meant by voting "guilty" is ridiculously far from the truth; that Hiss is not what the average mind, brought up on E. Phillips Oppenheim and pulp fiction, means by a "traitor"; that he surely feel himself neither venal nor skulking, for he has always been faithful in intent to his true fatherland, Humanity; that if in fact he has ended up by helping the interests of just another imperialist power, the Soviet Union, it is not his crime but that of the Soviet Union, which he took in good faith to be the deputy of mankind's best interests.

This was Henry Julian Wadleigh's defense: a minor source of information for Chambers in the pre-war years, and a witness at the Hiss trials, he attempted to declare his innocence and guilt at the same time. With no sign of contrition, he admitted passing secret documents to Chambers but insisted that his course had been justified by history; it had not even struck him, he explained condescendingly, as a matter of conscience—though merely joining the Communist party had, and he had finally *not* signed up.

The comic aspects of Wadleigh strike one first—the cartoonist's pink-tea radical, with his thick glasses, disordered hair, and acquired Oxford accent. The articles which he wrote for the *New York Post* are classics of unconscious humor, monuments to smugness and self-pity, and trailers for the novel which (of course!) he was busy writing about his Experience. When Hiss's lawyers found they could not pin on Wadleigh the stealing of

the papers Chambers had disconcertingly produced, they were content to make him the butt of their jokes. At several points during his questioning, the judge had to cover his mouth with his hand to preserve the dignity of the court. Wadleigh is the comic version of Alger Hiss.

The clowning of Wadleigh reveals what is not so easily read in Hiss: a moral obtuseness which underlies the whole case. Mr. Cooke tries to make of Wadleigh his tragic figure, but the true protagonist of tragedy suffers and learns. Wadleigh has learned nothing. He cannot conceive of having done anything *really* wrong. He finds in his own earlier activities only a certain excessive zeal, overbalanced by good will, and all excused by—Munich. Was he not a better man for having tried to counter, however ineptly, the shameful appeasement of Hitler? That the irony of events had made him, just insofar as he was more idealistic and committed, more helplessly the tool of evil, he cannot conceive. In the end, his "confession" is almost as crass a lie as the denial of Hiss—a disguise for self-congratulation, a device for clinging to the dream of innocence. He cannot, even in the dock, believe that a man of liberal persuasion is capable of wrong.

It was this belief that was the implicit dogma of American liberalism during the past decades, piling up a terrible burden of self-righteousness and self-deceit to be paid for on the day when it would become impossible any longer to believe that the man of good will is identical with the righteous man, and that the liberal is, *per se*, the hero. That day came at different times to different people: for some it was the Moscow Trials, for others the Soviet-Nazi pact, and for a good many—including a large number who had, during the war, regained lost illusions—it came on August 17, 1948, when Hiss and Chambers were brought face to face before the House Committee on Un-American Activities.

THE facts were clear from the moment of confrontation, but for many the facts did not matter. Chambers stated flatly that Hiss had been a Communist, his associate in the "underground"; Hiss as flatly denied it. Simply to ask *cui bono* would have been enough: which one of the men stood to gain by lying? But somehow such a common sense approach seemed excluded. The most fantastic psycho-

logical explanations were dredged up. One heard via the intellectual underground the unlikeliest, proto-Dostoevskian stories to suggest reasons for Chambers' self-vilifying testimony. *Psychopathia Sexualis* was hauled out, and Freud quoted glibly by the same skeptics who had laughed at the psychologizing explanations of the Moscow Trials.

But there remained still the detailed circumstantiality of Chambers' memories, the documents stolen from the office in which Hiss had worked, the microfilms taken from the dusty dumbwaiter in Brooklyn and hidden in the famous pumpkin on Chambers' Maryland farm. For all the theatrical instincts of Chambers, who seemed to possess a flair for adding one artistic touch too many to any situation, out of God knows what compulsion, the documents were there—the undeniable goods.

An unbiased look at the proceedings of the House Committee reveals that from the start Hiss quite apparently lied, or more precisely, half lied and equivocated with the canniness of the trained lawyer. During the trials his version of the events was delivered with great aplomb, but before the Committee one can see him uncertainly feeling his way into the situation, cautiously finding out at each point how much he will have to admit to escape entrapment.

At first, he said simply that to the best of his knowledge (the qualifying phrase hardly seemed significant, a lawyer's habit), he had never met the man Chambers who had named him as one of a Washington cell of infiltrators. There was no mention of espionage, it must be remembered, until Hiss had forced Chambers' hand. Then, advised perhaps of the convincing nature of Chambers' testimony, he began slowly to shift ground, first, however, taking the initiative and charging with increasing surliness that the Committee had been leaking back to Chambers everything he said. At this point the Committee, which had handled him until then with more than normal sympathy, began to press him hard. He could not say for sure, Hiss now testified, but he thought that certainly he had known no one who called himself "Chambers," or anyone who looked very like the photographs he had been shown. They were, however, not very good pictures, so he could not be positive. Indeed, the face on the photograph before him might be that

of the chairman of the Committee. It was his last joke.

Finally, he admitted that he had, after all, known the man in question, under a name he had written down on a pad in front of him. It was "George Crosley" (Chambers was later to say that, although he had used many names, he was quite sure he had never used that one), a dead-beat writer whom he had known casually, and with whom he had occasionally talked over possible story material, though he had really found the man despicable. As a matter of fact, he had even once, for certain obscure reasons, let the dead-beat move into his apartment for a couple of days, or was it weeks; and when Crosley had welshed on the rent, Hiss, for reasons even more obscure, had given him a car—just a little old car, it must be understood, with a "sassy" rumble seat, though one, Hiss admitted, to which he had been sentimentally attached. It is a fantastic story, enough to send anyone less well placed to jail without further ado. Later, there was to be a good deal of trouble over the dates of this strange transaction—and records were to turn up proving that the car had never been presented to Crosley-Chambers at all, but apparently to the Communist party!

ALL the while this amazing farrago was being served up by Hiss, Chambers was patiently building up the story of their actual relationship, born in intrigue and common devotion to an ideal, and destined to end in bitterness and mutual accusation. They had been comrades and close friends, Chambers said, he and the promising young lawyer, whom he was still able to describe as "of a great gentleness and sweetness of character." At first, their dealings were concerned only with dues and reports, but they had quickly grown closer together, in the sort of relationship hard to parallel outside the party, the two of them utterly dependent on each other's loyalty, and both betting their self-esteem on the truth of the Marxist-Leninist dream.

They are men who could never have met outside the Communist movement, and even as Communists they were utterly different: Chambers the romantic recruit of the 20's, hating a world that had rebuffed him at every encounter, and choosing the movement as an alternative to suicide; Hiss, universally respected, and by nature an opportunist, but

with a streak of social conscience (personified in his earnest wife, who could not even let a casual visitor call the day "fine" without reminding her of the plight of the sharecroppers), choosing the party to protect himself from a merely selfish kind of success. Different as they were, Chambers had found Hiss a "real Bolshevik," perhaps sensing in him a kind of hardness to which he himself could only aspire, and had defended him against the sneers of their Russian boss, Bykov, who always referred to Hiss condescendingly as "our dear lawyer."

The quality of the feeling that must have existed between the two men is revealed by Chambers' last-minute attempt to draw Hiss with him out of the party, after he himself had become convinced that the Soviet Union was serving not justice but her own selfish national interests. Feeling that he might well be killed by party agents after his desertion (such political murders have occurred even in America), Chambers, nevertheless, risked exposing himself by a final visit to Hiss's home. But Hiss had stood firm, scarcely listening to the arguments of Chambers, though he had finally wept a little (the scene stays in the imagination, the completely unexpected, uncharacteristic tears), and had given to Chambers a trivial Christmas present for his daughter—"a little rolling pin."

Perhaps, even before the break, Hiss was already tired of Chambers as a person, a little ashamed of his admiration for the shabby writer who wrote nothing, and who had a tendency to remake his experience as he told about it, retouching and bringing up the highlights here and there. Mrs. Hiss had distrusted him from the first, finding him, with a strange inconsistency for a genteel internationalist, "too foreign." They had pretended finally, Alger and "Crosley," that "Crosley" was a Russian, which made him all right, of course; and Chambers had played up to it with all his love of subterfuge.

WHATEVER the status of their personal relations, when Chambers had come to Hiss with his talk about the Moscow Trials and the betrayal of the revolution, Hiss already could not afford to listen to him. He had by then too much to lose; for, without ceasing to be a Bolshevik, he had become a "success," a respectable citizen. To acknowl-

edge that Russia could be fundamentally wrong would have changed the whole meaning of his own life, turned what had perhaps seemed to him his most unselfish and devoted acts, the stealing of State Department documents, into shameful crimes—into "treason"! Only the conviction that there was no final contradiction between his activities, public and private, could have made Hiss's life tolerable. He must have felt that what he had done as a New Deal lawyer, helping to expose the "munitions makers" in the Nye Committee, or working for the AAA in the Department of Agriculture, did not contradict what he tried to do as a member of a left-wing faction in the State Department, urging certain attitudes toward Chiang Kai-shek; and that what he had sought in both these capacities was merely completed by his "secret" work as a purveyor of information to warn the Soviet Union—his Soviet Union, mankind's Soviet Union—of the forces that worked for and against her in the inner world of diplomacy.

He was not a "traitor"! What the Un-American Activities Committee could not understand, what the two juries were certainly not able to comprehend, is that to Hiss, his service to the party and the Soviet Union is an expression of "loyalty," not "treason." Before consenting to marry him, Remington's former wife had made him solemnly pledge "not to succeed"; to so many of the generation of Remington and Hiss, the bourgeois success of the American Dream was the final treachery, and each step forward in their personal careers had to be justified in terms of opportunities provided for infiltration. Hiss offered his "espionage" as an earnest to the inner few whose opinion mattered to him (in those days chiefly Chambers, and always himself) that he had not "sold out" to the bourgeois world in which he was making a splendid career.

No wonder Hiss was inaccessible to Chambers' arguments against the party! No wonder he seemed scarcely willing to admit his existence, refusing him his very name! It was as if Hiss had wanted to shrug off his accuser, not like a real being in the outside world but like a nightmare. Indeed, the persistent voice of the man he had once admired must have seemed to him to possess the quality of a nightmare, speaking in its characteristic half-

whisper the doubts, thrust down in himself, that could destroy his self-esteem.

And so Hiss had spoken out over the condemning voice, protesting his innocence with a vigor that contrasted oddly with Chambers' quiet tone. All the accounts speak of the voice of the accuser as one that, symbolically enough, could scarcely be heard. There is, even in the printed testimony, a sense of a counter-desire not to be heard along with the resolve to speak out. Far from seeming the vindictive persecutor of some accounts, Chambers strikes us as oddly reluctant, willing for a long time to risk perjury rather than reveal the full guilt of his former comrade. What Chambers really seems to be after is a confession of the truth from Hiss; he does not feel he can hide forever what Hiss has done, but he would prefer him to speak out himself.

Hiss, on the other hand, baits Chambers furiously, daring him to become the complete "rat," as if knowing Chambers will suffer in speaking out, as if wanting to shame and punish him. He seems to have felt sure that Chambers could not really harm him. A man does not unflaggingly succeed from high school days to early middle age without losing something of humility, and forgetting that a single failure of the most superb luck is enough for destruction. When the end comes, when the threat of a suit for defamation against Chambers leads to the disclosure of the damning papers, to the trials of Hiss for perjury, and to the final conviction, one has the sense that both of the men are surprised.

SOME of the commentators on the case have spoken of the anti-Red "hysteria" that prevailed at the time of the case, as if in such an atmosphere the cards were hopelessly stacked against Alger Hiss. But precisely the opposite is the case. He is just the type that does not normally get caught in the indiscriminate "witch hunt," which tends to pick out those who look like "witches," the visible outsiders. A woman like Assistant Secretary of Defense Anna M. Rosenberg, for instance, foreign-born and a Jew, is much more likely to be haled up without any evidence against her, while a man like Hiss can slip past the ordinary Congressman, to whom Red really means loud-mouth or foreigner or Jew (Rankin, who was on the Committee that exam-

ined Hiss, apparently spent his spare time thumbing through *Who's Who in American Jewry*, and turned all his fire on—Chambers!).

The Committee did not want to believe Chambers. They were convinced by his, and his wife's, astonishingly specific memories: though some members of the Committee had been eager to "get the goods" on the New Deal, to catch out the State Department at last, they had apparently found it difficult to put much faith in Chambers. It was impossible to like him, as one instinctively liked Hiss for the boyish charm we think of as peculiarly American. Chambers seems to have worn his unprepossessing air (he is the sort of person of whom one believes immediately quite unfounded stories of insanity and depravity) deliberately, as if he had acquired in his revolutionary days the habit of rebuffing all admiration based on anything but his role in the party.

Every word he spoke declared him an ex-traitor, a present turncoat and squealer, and Hiss, sensing his inestimable advantage in a society whose values are largely set in boyhood when snitching is the ultimate sin, had traded on his role as the honest man confronted by the "rat." Really, Hiss kept insisting, they'd have to call the Harvard Club, say he'd be a few minutes late to dinner—after taking care of this unpleasantness. For a while it came off quite successfully, coming from one who visibly belonged, whose clothes beautifully fitted, whose manners were adequate to all occasions.

We learned later, of course, how much the genteel aspect of Hiss was itself a mask, imposed on a background of disorder and uncertainty not unlike Chambers': the suicide of his father and sister, the undefined psychological difficulties of his stepson, into whose allowance from his actual father, we remember, the Hisses sometimes dipped for contributions to the party. It was as if Alger Hiss had dedicated himself to fulfilling, along with his dream of a New Humanity, the other dream his father had passed on to him with his first name—from rags to riches. How strangely the Marxist ideal and the dream of Horatio Alger blended into the motives of his treason. . . .

ANY good bourgeois bristles when confronted with Whittaker Chambers. His years

as an editor on *Time* (he is "brilliant," of course, but the adjective is itself ambivalent), his present role as a small farmer, cannot conceal his real identity as the outsider: the "butterball who could not even learn to play marbles," the writer of poetry for little magazines, the obnoxious young radical expelled from college, the uncomfortable spirit that either blasphemes or is too religious for respectability. At one point, Chambers is asked by a Committee member how he spent his time during a week-long period when he had borrowed Hiss's apartment; and when he says, "reading . . ." one feels the troubled silence. How could anyone read so long? It is the suspicious vagary of the kind of man who once believed in Stalin and now believes in the Devil.

After his years in the "underground," he still seems ill at ease in our daylight world; and beneath the guise of the magazine executive, assumed only, we remember, to establish an "identity" for himself as a protection against being murdered by the GPU, the old Chambers persists. Everyone who had known him in his revolutionary days—except Hiss, of course—had no difficulty in recognizing Chambers at the time of the trial.

The jowls and the new teeth do not fundamentally change the face we can still see on the inside back cover of the Communist literary magazine, the *New Masses*, for July 1931. After twenty years, the young Chambers looks up at us still with the sullen certainty of one who has discovered in the revolution an answer to the insecurity and doubt which had brought his brother to suicide, him to months of despair and near paralysis. In the movement he had found a way out of immobility, a way to join with the other insulted and injured of the earth to change the world which excluded them. To appear in the *New Masses* in those days was not merely to be a writer, but to subscribe to a new myth of the writer, summed up in the blurb under the photograph: "Youth as a periodically vagrant laborer in Deep South, Plains, Northwest. Brief Columbia College experience ending with atheist publication. . . . Joined revolutionary movement 1925. . . ."

Hiss, who really knew Chambers, of course, better than anyone else except Chambers' wife, put his finger on the sources of this myth when he told the Committee that

Chambers thought of himself as a kind of Jim Tully or Jack London. To understand Chambers, one must understand the concept of the literary bum as hero that came out of Tully and London, a special Marxist class-angling of the old bohemian ideal. Chambers' once living in the same quarters with an old whore, and his stealing of library books of which Hiss's lawyers and psychiatrists were to make so much during the trials, his name-changing and wandering, were all standard procedure for the rebel-intellectual in those days.

THE life style he adopted was perfected in the Communist "Third Period," in the years before 1935, and it is the Third Period we must first of all understand. The term is Lenin's, invented to describe that last stage of imperialism, the age of cataclysmic wars and revolutions, but it comes also to describe the way of life of those who believed themselves the sole carriers of the future in those final days. To the young comrades in their blue work shirts or flat-heeled shoes, there was no need to come to terms with the dying bourgeois world; Marx had told them that the point was to change it. They lived in a fine apocalyptic fury, issuing leaflets to ROTC units in Midwestern agricultural colleges, urging the "peasants and soldiers" to turn their guns the other way; they cried for an autonomous Negro republic to be carved out of the Deep South; and in the few cities where they had sufficient numbers, they were forever rushing "into the streets" to shout their resolve to "Defend the Soviet Union" against their own bourgeoisie in case of war. The only reality in their paranoid world was the Workers' Fatherland, still encircled and unrecognized by our own government. Here is a typical passage from an editorial that appeared in the *New Masses* in 1931, and which may actually have been written by Chambers:

It is only a question of time until all the imperialist powers mobilize their manpower and hurl its bleeding masses in a rain of steel across the frontiers, to destroy the first Socialist Republic. In this situation what are the intellectuals to do? . . . They realize, however imperfectly, that the Union of Soviet Socialist Republics represents the advance guard, the hope of human progress and civilization. . . . And they desire, the most advanced of them, to employ their

minds as weapons in the fight to save the Soviet Union from its reactionary enemies.

Reread in the pages of the old magazine, in the heavy black format that seems to shriek at us across the years, and surrounded by the pen and ink drawings with their incredibly depraved bosses and their unbelievably noble workers, the banal paragraph seems merely unconscionably funny, like a bad silent film. But when we remember the universal loss of faith in those years of mass unemployment and of seemingly endless depression, we can appreciate the attractiveness of the Marxist answer, guaranteed by the miraculous existence of the Soviet Union, the last best hope of human culture. We sense, too, the appeal of violence in a world of words—an instant of bloodshed and the whole golden future unfolds!

No Third Perioder could have become, like a later type of Communist, really a "traitor" as distinguished from a mere "spy." How could they betray a world they publicly disavowed? Romantic and ridiculous, they were still revolutionaries, their allegiance single and unconcealed. When such Communists went underground they hid, but they never pretended to be good bourgeois. When the call came in 1932 from Max Bedacht, asking Chambers to disappear as the individual he had been in order to take on "special" work, Chambers seems to have welcomed the chance. He had already sacrificed his will to party discipline, his fate to history. He had little more to offer up beyond his name and the small fame that had become attached to it in the movement: the praise he had received in the Russian press for his stories of Communist life, the popularity of the play *Can You Hear Their Voices*, based on one of his works, already presented at Vassar and about to be produced in Russia.

Something in his temperament seems to have greeted the prospect of self-immolation; even before he entered what the Communists mean by the "underground," he had been, in the Dostoevskian sense, an underground man, his own enemy. It had apparently pleased him to take the final step, to become one whose death it would be forbidden to notice. What did Mundt or Rankin or Dixon know of Dostoevsky, or those twenty-four jurors of the kind of alienated life that conditioned Chambers? What trick of history

brought them and him into the same room, pushed them toward an uneasy alliance?

IT WAS Hiss—the embodiment of the subsequent Popular Front era, as Chambers was the embodiment of the Third Period—who provided the common link: Hiss who had as desperately to look respectable as Chambers had not to. The New Deal had moved American politics left, and had opened the doors of the trade unions and the Washington bureaus to the university intelligentsia at the very moment when that intelligentsia had been penetrated by the Communists, and Communism had undergone two decisive changes: first, the national Communist parties had lost all initiative and internal democracy, coming under the absolute control of the Russian bureaucracy; and second, world Stalinism had adopted the Popular Front line of collaboration with the bourgeoisie.

No longer was the ideal Bolshevik the open rebel, the poet-bum chanting songs of protest, but the principled government worker with the pressed suit and the clean-cut look. It was the day of "fronts" and "mass organizations," of infiltrating and "capturing" and "boring from within." As the headlines in the *Daily Worker* declared peace-with-capitalism, a new kind of underground Communist moved into Washington, unnoticed among the purer, pragmatic New Dealers.

Hiss is the prototype of the new-model Bolshevik (Lee Pressman and Henry Collins and John Abt, Noel Field and George Silverman were others) who was the more valuable as he seemed less radical. Far from being urged to sell the party press, he was even discouraged from reading it. These new secret workers had never been open members of the party; they did not merely hide, but pretended to be what they were not. For the first time, a corps of Communists existed for whom "treason," in the sense of real deceit, was possible. These were not revolutionaries but Machiavellians, men with a double allegiance, making the best of two worlds and often, like Hiss, profiting immensely within the society they worked so hard to destroy.

Doubtless some of these new Bolsheviks were able to deceive themselves into believ-

ing that there was no actual contradiction between their real allegiance and their pretended one. What helped the self-deception was the rise of Nazi Germany as the chief threat on the world scene, and the changing role of the Soviet Union in international affairs. The blanket phrase "anti-fascism" covered over conflicts as deep as life itself. On the one hand, the New Deal had finally recognized the new Russian regime; and on the other hand, Communist Russia had joined the fellowship of nations. In the League of Nations (which Lenin had long before called "a den of thieves"), Litvinov was calling for the unity of the anti-fascist world. The watchword was no longer "Defend the Soviet Union!" but "Establish Collective Security!" The Communists insisted that the interests of Russia and the United States were forever identical, and the majority of liberals collaborated in the hoax—which was to crash with the signing of the Nazi-Soviet pact, be ridiculously revived during the war when we were "allies," and collapse once more at the foot of the Iron Curtain. Here are the words of Earl Browder, written in the first flush of the Popular Front honeymoon:

In this world movement, there stand out before the peace-loving peoples of the world two centers of resistance to the fascist flood, two points from which leadership and inspiration can be given to the majority of mankind struggling for democracy and peace, two rallying grounds for the hard-pressed forces of progress and culture—the Soviet Union and the United States. . . . The Soviet Union and the United States have common problems, common interests and common enemies. That is a central fact in the new world situation.

The platitudes, read in their context of rallies-for-Spain sponsored by the "big names" from Hollywood and Broadway, seem only a little less old-fashioned and absurd than those of 1931, but we must read them with attention, remembering that they made treason easy. The bureaucrat, busy making himself a niche in the government service while transmitting secret material to the Russians, didn't even have to pose to himself a moral "either-or"; in both his roles, he could consider himself serving what Browder liked to call "the spirit of Jefferson, Jackson and Lincoln."

BEFORE the Popular Front Communist the ordinary Congressman is helpless, unless there is a "renegade" willing to make revelations. The average legislator pursues ordinarily one of two policies in regard to Communists, springing from his profound inability or unwillingness to tell a Stalinist from a liberal. Either he lumps together as "Reds" everybody left-of-center (and even an occasional right-winger by mistake), or he refuses to recognize as a Communist anyone who denies it. The one kind of Communist likely to be missed by both approaches is the genteel Bolshevik who keeps his nose clean and never even reads the *New Republic*.

That is why the Committee was at first so completely buffaloed by Hiss. When he thundered righteously, "I am sorry but I cannot but feel to such an extent that it is difficult for me to control myself that you can sit there, Mr. Hébert, and say to me casually that you have heard that man [Chambers] and you have heard me, and that you just have no basis for judging which one is telling the truth," Hébert could only stutter lamely something about the degrading necessity of using low "stool pigeons" like Chambers and Miss Bentley.

It is easy enough to understand the shouts of "red herring!" raised in the earlier days of the case by certain old-line Democrats led by President Truman. They did not dissent on principle, but merely on party lines. If a venture sparked by Republicans is admitted to have succeeded, the Democrats stand to lose votes; and one denies anything that might lose votes. But the real liberals, in and out of the Democratic party, from whose ranks most of the actual believers in the innocence of Hiss are drawn, are a different matter. They had not even listened to the earlier testimony, out of a feeling that paying any heed to the House Committee on Un-American Activities was playing into the hands of the enemy, and that, in any event, the personnel and procedures of that Committee made it impossible for it to arrive at the truth. During the trials they paid attention for the first time.

Chambers' documentary evidence was still there, of course, and his circumstantial story was told again; but by this time Hiss was able to make a better showing than he had, taken unawares, before the Committee. He

was imperturbable and glib in his testimony; and his lawyers were able to make Chambers seem more than ever a "moral leper," turning his very virtues (the lies and half-revelations by which he had attempted to protect Hiss) against him, and mocking his new-found religion. All the world distrusts a convert, but no part of it does so more heartily than the liberals. Finally, there were the psychiatrists, prepared on the basis of courtroom observation to call Chambers seriously unbalanced.

But most important of all, there arose to stand beside Hiss, one by one, a series of respectable character witnesses, an elite corps, as it were, of the New Deal, distinguished civil servants and honored judges, until it seemed as if the whole movement that from 1932 on had swept the country out of fear and towards prosperity was staking its very reputation on the innocence of this single man. We know the character witnesses did not deliberately lie. But if they were not liars—as they certainly were *not*—they were, in some sense, fools. It is not an easy admission, certainly not for them, but not even for those (among whom I include myself) who have admired in them a vision of national life that still appears worth striving for.

EVEN the wisdom of Franklin Roosevelt, the final culture hero of our liberal era, is brought into question. For he seems personally to have pooh-poohed the suspicions, relayed to him in 1940 by Ambassador Bullitt, about the reliability of Hiss. How could he have done otherwise? Was not Hiss one of those young men, mocked by the reactionary press as "brain-trusters," it had been his special pride to bring into political life? The big-city bosses, the unprincipled "experts," and the party hacks, he had been forced to carry with him for expediency's sake; but these young idealists he had supported for the sake of principle. Superficially, the history of Hiss is the prototypical history of the New Dealer at his best: the distinguished years at Harvard Law School, the secretaryship to the almost mythical Justice Holmes, the brilliant career that began in the Nye Committee and culminated at Teheran.

Certainly, a generation was on trial with Hiss, on trial not, it must be noticed, for having struggled toward a better world, but for

having substituted sentimentality for intelligence in that struggle, for having failed to understand the moral conditions that must determine its outcome. What is involved is not any question of all or most of the younger New Dealers having been, like Hiss, secret agents of the GPU, but of their having been so busy denying that there was a GPU or that it mattered, that they could not identify an enemy of all the values in which they most profoundly believed.

They cannot even flatter themselves on having been fooled by master tricksters. Hiss was, perhaps, an extraordinarily accomplished dissembler, but what of the Pressmans, the Wadleighs, and the Remingtons, more obvious in their intended deviousness? Lest the New Dealers seem "Red-baiters," they preferred to be fools. Even in the case of Hiss, disquieting reports were transmitted to his superiors from time to time, and it was noticed, on at least one occasion, that information which passed through his hands had an odd way of leaking out. At one point A. A. Berle, after a conversation with Chambers, had gone to Dean Acheson, then Hiss's immediate superior, to report the rumor that "the Hiss boys" were members of a secret Communist group, and Acheson called in Donald Hiss to ask him if he and his brother were really Reds.

The naivety of the thing is monumental! He asked Donald Hiss, and when Hiss said no, Acheson was "satisfied." After all, he had known "the Hiss boys" since they were children; they had gone to the same schools, belonged to the same clubs, could speak man to man. Dean Acheson simply could not bring himself to believe that if the Hisses, who were gentlemen, were also Communists, they would as a matter of course lie. One thinks of Mrs. Roosevelt, under somewhat similar circumstances, calling the leaders of the American Student Union into her drawing room, asking them please to tell her the real truth: were they Communists?

In part, the lack of realism shared by Acheson and Mrs. Roosevelt came from belonging to a world in which liberals and conservatives (and even radicals) are assumed to share the same moral values, the values of the old Judeo-Christian ethical system, however secularized; but in another sense, it arises from long conditioning of the

public mind by the "front organizations" of the late 30's, through which the bulk of the liberals learned to maintain the paradox that (a) there were really no Communists, just the hallucinations of witch hunters and (b) if there were Communists, they were, despite their shrillness and bad manners, fundamentally on the side of justice. After all, the Communists are "left," and everyone knows that only the "right" is bad. This absurd metaphor of "leftness" managed to conceal from men of good will and some intelligence the essential fact that the Communists had ceased to subscribe to a political morality universally shared, whatever its abuses, until 1917. How many victims of this confusion were able to spend years moving in and out of Communist fronts and say blandly in the end, "To the best of my knowledge, I have never known an actual Communist"!

SEEN in this larger context, the half-deliberate blindness of so many decent people, which is a vital part of the total Hiss case, explains itself. The erstwhile defenders of Hiss's innocence show a growing tendency to remain silent, but their silence does not mean, alas, that they are finally convinced. Looking through Carey McWilliams' recent *Witch Hunt*, for instance, one is startled to discover in a study of the rising tide of accusations of Communism, no mention of the name of Alger Hiss—nor, indeed, of Klaus Fuchs. So significant an oversight must mean, if not active skepticism about Hiss's guilt, a feeling that his case is somehow less relevant than those in which charges of Communism have not been substantiated.

We must clearly understand that the failure of Hiss to confess, far from casting doubt on his guilt, merely helps to define its nature. If Hiss's guilt is of the sort I have tried to indicate, it is clear that, without some change of heart or values, he could not possibly have confessed. One has only to think of the recent trial of the twelve members of the national committee of the Communist party. Even these avowed and open leaders of the movement, whom one had perhaps expected to cry out their faith proudly before the tribunal, could only plead—so ingrained had the Popular Front lie become—in the teeth of the evidence of their own early writings, that (a) they had never advocated

revolution and (b) by God, it was their inalienable right as American citizens to do so. What could one expect from Hiss?

If there is a note of tragedy in the case, it is provided by Chambers, the informer driven to mortify himself and to harm those he still loves. The Third Perioder, still pursuing the absolute, makes a tragic final appearance as the scorned squealer; the Popular Fronter can only exit in the role of the hopeless liar. It is difficult to say what factor is most decisive in cutting Hiss off finally from the great privilege of confession; opportunism or perverted idealism, moral obtuseness or the habit of Machiavellianism; they are all inextricably intermingled.

In the end he failed all liberals, all who had, in some sense and at some time, shared his illusions (and who that calls himself a liberal is exempt?), all who demanded of him that he speak aloud a common recognition of complicity. And yet, perhaps they did not really want him to utter a confession; it would have been enough had he admitted a mistake rather than confessed a positive evil. Maybe, at the bottom of their hearts, they did not finally want him to admit anything, but preferred the chance he gave them to say: he is, we are, innocent.

AMERICAN liberalism has been reluctant to leave the garden of its illusion; but it can dally no longer: the age of innocence is dead. The Hiss case marks the death of an era, but it also promises a rebirth if we are willing to learn its lessons. We who would still like to think of ourselves as liberals must be willing to declare that mere liberal principle is not in itself a guarantee against evil; that the wrongdoer is not always the other—"they" and not "us"; that there is no magic in the words "left" or "progressive" or "socialist" that can prevent deceit and the abuse of power.

It is not necessary that we liberals be self-flagellants. We have desired good, and we have done some; but we have also done great evil. The confession in itself is nothing, but without the confession there can be no understanding, and without the understanding of what the Hiss case tries desperately to declare, we will not be able to move forward from a liberalism of innocence to a liberalism of responsibility.